

Decree and Assembly in Classical Athens

Peter Liddel

The recent referendum on whether the UK should remain in, or leave, the European Union was a rare example of the British people being asked to influence policy directly. In ancient Athens, however, the existence of the popular assembly meant that male citizens were routinely asked to make policy decisions. How did this work and what were the limits?

Polis and assembly

In the archaic and classical periods, the Greek world was divided into more than 1000 political entities, known as *poleis* (sing. *polis*). Of the many attempts to render the word *poleis* in English, one translation is that of ‘city-communities’, a phrase which communicates both their territorial nature and the fact that they were populated by (in addition to slaves and outsiders) a group of people – a community – who were identified as its citizens. In those cities which were organized along democratic lines, adult citizen males (in Athens defined as those who were 20 and over and could prove that they were born of two citizen parents) possessed the right to attend meetings of the popular assembly. It was at these meetings that matters of great importance to the community as a whole were discussed, that proposals were debated, and decisions were made.

People-power

On the eve of the Peloponnesian war in 432/1 B.C., after the Spartans had sent a third embassy bearing an ultimatum to the Athenians, the Athenians held an assembly to discuss their response. Thucydides says that many citizens offered different proposals, some advocating war, and others advocating peace. Pericles, the son of Xanthippus, the most prominent of the Athenians at the time, stood up at the speakers’ platform and made a speech promoting a tough response towards the Spartans. The Athenians were persuaded and voted that they would do nothing under duress. By voting in this way, the Athenian assembly made a decree which, after the failure of negotiations, paved the road to war with the Spartans: the Athenian citizens themselves had voted

for war. While the persuasion of Pericles clearly played a role, the male citizens clearly demonstrated their ability to lead the *polis* into war, and the decree (in Greek, the *psephisma*, the ‘thing voted by ballot’) was the instrument of this power.

Once the wheels of war were set in motion, the role of the people did not vanish: during the fifth century B.C., all substantial decisions of the Athenian community were made by decree of the assembly. Whereas some lesser decisions (e.g. to dispatch ambassadors or to make adjustments to armed forces) may have been taken on the basis of decrees voted by the Athenian *boule* (the council of 500 male citizens, the makeup of which changed every year) alone, big decisions, such as that to evacuate wives, children, livestock, and possessions from Attica were made by decree of the people.

Thucydides’ description of political decisions appears to emphasize the role of the assembly; if anything, it significantly understates the important role of the *boule* in the decision-making process. Thucydides’ account highlights the power – and the fickleness – of the assembly. The most famous example of a u-turn took place during the early years of the Peloponnesian war. In 428/7 B.C., after the revolt led by the pro-Spartan elements of the population of Mytilene on the north Aegean island of Lesbos, the Athenians voted to approve Cleon’s proposal to execute the whole adult male population of the city and to enslave the women and children; a trireme was sent out to the city with orders to announce the punishment. But on the next day there arose a feeling among the Athenian people that this was an unjust decision. After a debate on the subject, the otherwise unknown Diodotos persuaded a slim majority of Athenians to take a different course and put those responsible for the revolt on trial; another trireme was sent out to make this

announcement, and its rowers were offered rewards for catching up with the one sent out previously. They rowed with great speed and, facing no adverse weather conditions, arrived at the shore of Mytilene just as the Athenian commander Paches was on the point of putting the original, harsh, decree into action; they were able to prevent the massacre (though those Mytileneans judged responsible for the revolt were executed).

How do modern states go to war? In the UK, the Government can declare war and send armed forces into overseas conflicts without the support or agreement of Parliament. However, before the Iraq war in 2003 and the decision to carry out air-strikes on Syria in 2014, the Government put the matter to a vote in the House of Commons; on both occasions the proposals were approved by a majority of MPs. In practice, then, literally earth-shattering decisions – with implications not only for the state’s armed forces, those living in conflict zones, and those who face the wider consequences of intervention – are taken by the representatives elected by UK citizens normally every 5 years.

Here, then, we can identify a key difference between modern representative and ancient Greek direct democracy: in Greece the power to make big decisions, such as declarations of war, lay with the community of male citizens rather than elected representatives. It is highly unlikely that UK citizens will ever be consulted to see whether a majority of them supports its government in the Syrian intervention. A referendum on EU membership is one thing, but to consult the people on matters of war and peace would be viewed as both irregular constitutional practice and politically a highly risky strategy.

Limits to popular power

When we focus on the decree of the popular assembly in ancient Athens, we run the risk of over-stating its importance as an instrument through which popular power was exerted. One must remember that even in fifth-century Athens, it is likely that it was usual practice for a decree to undergo ‘prior consideration’ (*probouleu-*

sis) by the council of 500 before it was enacted. After 403/2 B.C., the Athenian assembly's power seems to have been further reduced when the process of making laws (*nomoi*) was passed to the 500 law-makers (*nomothetai*, who were themselves drawn from the pool of 6000 annually-selected citizen judges).

At times of political weakness, assemblies – even those of the Athenians – were coerced or intimidated into accepting the decisions of other, stronger political entities: in 404/3 B.C. the Athenians were basically starved into accepting the terms of the Spartans (including the destruction of Athenian walls and most of her navy) despite the fact that the assembly had earlier passed a decree forbidding anyone from making such proposals. At the assembly in 349/8 (difficult days for the Athenians as they struggled to face up to the emerging power of Philip of Macedon) Demosthenes complained to the Athenians that their military actions failed to live up to the promise of the assembly's decrees: the speech reflects the Athenians' awareness of their declining influence over the Greek world.

Such frustrations must have been the norm faced by most citizen-assemblies of the Greek world for much of their history. And on any occasion when a decree of one Greek *polis* imposed unpopular measures upon another community, there must have been resentment and resistance: we are reminded of this by a passage in Aristophanes' *Birds* in which an Athenian 'Decree-seller' charges the character Peisetairos with defecating over the inscribed version of an Athenian decree.

Decrees and publicity

From the end of the fifth century B.C., it appears to be the case that the Athenians stored documentary records of their decrees in an archive. But this was not the sole means by which knowledge of them was disseminated; ancient writers accrued knowledge through word-of-mouth and discussion at the assembly. Moreover, versions of large numbers of these decrees (particularly those pertaining to the granting of honours or inter-state relations) were written up on specially-commissioned slabs of marble (known as *stelai*) and were placed on the Acropolis, among the sanctuaries and associated dedications. To set up a decree on stone may even have bestowed some religious significance on its content. The inscription was also a monument: not only of the alliance it recorded, the honorand, or its proposer, but to the many-sided activity of the Athenian council and assembly.

Politics, ancient and modern

In the context of classical Athens, the

passing of decrees, then, was not only a means through which the people made decisions (that is, of dealing with day-to-day crises and making the most of opportunities) and attempted to impose them, but it might also be seen as an attempt to project the power of the Athenian people. There was, at the same time, debate about political liability: at times the Athenians held their politicians responsible for decisions that had damaging consequences; Diodotos, for instance, complained that the Athenians who voted for such motions should shoulder some of the responsibility. In the modern world, on the other hand, political decisions are, for the most part, viewed as the legacies of particular governments. Referenda are rare; the decision to call the UK referendum on EU membership appears to have had a huge impact on the political scene by artificially herding the electorate into 'yes' and 'no' camps on a complicated, sensitive, and significant issue. But we should offer a balanced analysis of democratic behaviour in the light of the Brexit vote (and also, the even more consequential election of Donald Trump and the rise of far-right demagoguery in Europe): it is important for voters to consider the consequences of their choices, and at the same time it is the responsibility of state institutions to offer full and lucid information on the implications of their decisions. These ideals were within grasp in ancient Athens, where a high proportion of male citizens was engaged in politics and had no choice but to face up immediately to its consequences. But in the postmodern condition of self-seeking party politics, media distortion of the issues at stake, and growing social and economic inequality, it is hard to see how either of them can be realized.

Information about Athenian decrees of the classical period is becoming ever more accessible. Not only does the Berlin-based *Inscriptiones Graecae* continue to publish new and revised scholarly editions of decrees, but the open-access website *Attic Inscriptions Online* now makes translations of them readily available, free of charge, to everyone: <https://www.atticinscriptions.com/>.

Peter Liddel teaches Greek history at the University of Manchester. He is as democratic as he is commanding and always consults before making decisions.